



Crowds waiting in front of the Laurier home in *The Funeral of Sir Wilfrid Laurier*, Ottawa, Saturday Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup> (1919)



Laurier's body is carried out of the Victoria Museum. The footage shot by the cameraman on the left can be viewed in *State Funeral of the Late Right Honourable Sir Wilfrid Laurier February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1919* (Pathéscope of Canada).

# A Rebirth and a Funeral: The Cinémathèque Québécoise Restores a Long-Lost Actuality by Canadian Film Pioneer Léo-Ernest Ouimet

Louis Pelletier

Louis Pelletier is part of the TECHNÈS (International Research Partnership on Cinema Technology) team, and a post-doctoral researcher at the Université de Montréal.

On the opening night of the TECHNÈS-organized “Cinema in the Eye of the Collector” conference, 4-8 June 2017, the Cinémathèque québécoise screened a new restoration. This was of a 1919 topical, produced by Canadian film pioneer Léo-Ernest Ouimet, of the funeral of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, prime minister of Canada between 1896 and 1911.<sup>1</sup> Unseen for nearly a century, the film had been recently discovered by the author, in a private collection acquired by Cinémathèque québécoise with the help of research group Scope: pour une nouvelle histoire du cinéma au Québec/Scope: For a New History of Cinema in Québec, and restored by L'Immagine Ritrovata in Bologna. The story of the film's unexpected discovery and rebirth provides a striking demonstration of what academics, archivists, and collectors can accomplish when they work together. It also raises many essential questions pertaining to film heritage in nations existing on the periphery of major film production centers, the dissemination of actuality footage, and the contribution of collectors to film history and historiography.

Entitled *The Funeral of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Ottawa, Saturday Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup>*, the Ouimet topical now preserved by Cinémathèque québécoise testifies to the wide popularity enjoyed by the first French-Canadian to become head of the federal government. Laurier had ushered Canada into modernity during his four consecutive terms as prime minister following the federal elections of 23 June 1896 – a mere four days before the Canadian premiere of the Lumière Cinématographe in Montreal. He was widely credited for helping to bridge the gap between the embattled French- and English-speaking communities, industrializing the country, and, according to one title from the topical, “[establishing] for ever the recognition of [the] Dominion as an integral force in world politics.” Laurier was still serving as leader of the Liberal Party at the time of his death from a cerebral haemorrhage on 17 February 1919.

The restored topical shows massive crowds braving the cold outside the Laurier home, at the Victoria Museum where his body was lying in state,<sup>2</sup> along the itinerary of the funeral

1. The restoration can be viewed online at <<https://vimeo.com/220319723>>.

2. The Canadian Parliament had been destroyed by fire on 03 February 1916, forcing parliamentarians to relocate to the newly-erected Victoria Museum until 1920. The Victoria Museum building is now the home of the Canadian Museum of Nature.

procession, at the Notre-Dame Basilica, and at Laurier's final resting place in the Notre Dame cemetery. Visible in the crowds are throngs of newsreel cameramen (one shot shows at least four) and photographers commandeering all sorts of vantage points: stairs, fences, trees. Ouimet himself had sent no fewer than three camera operators to cover the event for his company Specialty Film Import. Bert Mason and Charlie Lalumière made the trip from the Montreal head office, while Blaine Irish was dispatched from Toronto.<sup>3</sup> All three would, in time, play significant roles in Canadian film history: Mason as a freelance cinematographer and purveyor of small-gauge films and equipment, Lalumière as an importer of European features and the owner of Montreal's first art-house cinema, and Irish as the founder of Filmcraft Industries.

The importance of the contribution made by these individuals to Canadian film history pales in comparison to that of their employer, Léo-Ernest Ouimet. Born into a farming family in 1877, Ouimet left for the city in the early 1890s to become an electrician. He eventually learned moving-picture projection under the tutelage of an Edison representative, Bert Fenton, and opened his pioneering Ouimetoscope moving-picture theatre in January 1906. Between the mid-noughts and the early 1920s, Ouimet also operated one of the leading Canadian film exchanges, and unfailingly supported the era's sole Canadian film trade journal.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Ouimet became the first French-Canadian filmmaker when he acquired a Pathé moving picture camera in 1906.<sup>5</sup> He would eventually produce about 400 films, including the more-than-300 issues of *British Canadian Pathé News*, issued twice weekly by his organization between 1919 and 1922. The films produced – and sometimes shot – by Ouimet covered both popular festivities, and major news events such as the collapse

of the Québec bridge in 1907, the Québec Tercentenary in 1908, and the aftermath of the explosion that ravaged much of Halifax in 1917.

Tragically, less than 10% of Ouimet's abundant film production is known to survive. Library and Archives Canada holds bits and pieces of a handful of issues of the *British Canadian Pathé News* (most of this material having been dug out of the permafrost in Dawson City in 1978<sup>6</sup>), while Cinémathèque québécoise preserves two reels of Ouimet home movies: *Mes espérances en 1908* (a compilation of scenes of family life once proudly exhibited at the Ouimetoscope), and a private record of the funeral of Ouimet's son Georges in 1921.

The Laurier funeral topical is the first Ouimet film to be unearthed in more than thirty years – a find made especially important by the fact that it appears to contain some of the most widely-seen Canadian moving images of the silent era. The reel was discovered during a survey of the films left behind by a deceased collector, Jean Bélanger. A member of the Montreal constabulary, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bélanger had amassed a film collection described by the celebrated Canadian film director Gordon Sparling as "the largest – and best – 'private' film archive in all Canada!"<sup>7</sup> Made up of several thousand reels of varied formats (35mm, 28mm, 16mm, 9.5mm, and 8mm) and genres (fiction, industrial, educational, amateur, and silent films, as well as soundies, documentaries, and travelogues), the collection had remained out of sight while its owner was alive. Bélanger had many contacts among historians and archivists, but – with the exception of a few reels sold to the National Archives of Canada in the 1970s – steadfastly refused to show the unique films he had acquired. According to many of those who crossed paths with him, Bélanger only wanted to sell the collection as a package for an ever-increasing price that soon reached two million Canadian dollars. This sum was to go toward his real passion of record collecting: he also left behind about 10,000 78rpm records.

3. "Pathé Films the Laurier Funeral," *Moving Picture World*, 15 March 1919, p.1502.

4. *Canadian Moving Picture Digest*, 5 November 1927, p.6.

5. For more information on Ouimet's film production, see the online "Filmographie des 'vues' tournées au Québec au temps du muet" at <cri.histart.umontreal.ca/grafics/fr/filmo>, and Léon-H. Bélanger, *Les Ouimetoscopes: Léo-Ernest Ouimet et les débuts du cinéma Québécois*. Montréal-Nord: VLB éditeur, 1978.

6. See Sam Kula, "Up from the Permafrost: The Dawson City Collection," in *This Film Is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film*, ed. Roger Smither and Catherine A. Surowiec. Bruxelles: FIAF, 2002, pp.213-218.

7. Gordon Sparling, letter to Jean Bélanger, 28 October 1982, Pierre Pageau collection.

As individuals who had been in touch with Bélanger as part of their activities in heritage institutions reached retirement, the archival community slowly forgot this exceptional collection which contained – lost among the Castle Films and TV prints of Chaplin comedies – dozens of Canadian films dating as far back as the 1910s that nobody else had cared to preserve. In that respect, one should remember that Canadian cinema developed in the shadow of the American, French, and British films flooding the nation's theatres and that, as a result, almost all Canadian films produced before the 1960s belong to marginalized genres such as government films, travelogues, sponsored films, amateur films, and newsreels.

In a letter proudly reproduced in one of the film catalogues meticulously prepared by Bélanger, Gordon Sparling lauds the collector for trying to compensate for the inertia of institutions and established archives when it came to such strands of film production, almost synonymous with Canadian film history:

*I was particularly stirred by the [catalogue] section on Canadian films. It is only a couple of decades ago since nobody seemed to give a damn about preserving our motion picture history. For a long time, I was one of the very few small voices crying in a very large wilderness. You were one of the pioneers who not only said "save our old pictures" but did something about it.<sup>8</sup>*

The pictures were saved, but in limbo as the collector believed that granting access to film historians and researchers would bring down their monetary value. It was only after Bélanger's death that this exceptional collection finally surfaced: his daughter and legatee Carolle Bélanger began to sell it piecemeal. One of the crown jewels of the collection, a 35mm nitrate reel of the Laurier funeral topical was acquired in August 2016 by the Cinémathèque québécoise, thanks partly to donations from two of the founding members of Scope, Jean-Pierre Sirois-Trahan and the author.

Once the reel reached the archive, the first challenge was to identify it. Forensic analysis revealed that it was printed on 1919 Kodak stock, but, as its opening credits were missing and its intertitles were devoid of identifying marks, positive identification could only be established through circumstantial evidence. A first element pointing towards Specialty Film Import was a file belonging to Bélanger which listed Ouimet as the film's producer. While we will never know how Bélanger obtained the reel or why he believed it had been produced by Ouimet, this was far from irrelevant. The collector is on record as having sold issues of the *British Canadian Pathé News* to Library and Archives Canada, which demonstrates that, at some point, he had indeed managed to locate and acquire a number of surviving Ouimet reels.

The identification of the reel was otherwise established through a process of elimination. Three organizations are known to have produced topicals on the occasion of Wilfrid Laurier's funeral. One was Ouimet's Specialty Film Import. Another was the Toronto-based Pathéscope of Canada which produced *State Funeral of the Late Right Honourable Sir Wilfrid Laurier February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1919* for the Ontario Motion Picture Bureau (OMPB). This, made in the 28mm format used by the OMPB, had been preserved and digitized by Library and Archives Canada, and was not the same as the one in the Bélanger collection.<sup>9</sup> Another topical, entitled *Laurier's Funeral*, was released as a "Dominion Government Special." However, the record for the print of this film submitted to the Board of Censors of the Province of Québec on 25 February 1919 describes a two-reeler.<sup>10</sup>

An important fact corroborating the attribution of the Bélanger reel to Ouimet is the inclusion in a British *Pathé Gazette* newsreel of a segment dedicated to the Laurier funeral and using some of the same footage.<sup>11</sup> This strongly suggested that the Bélanger reel had been produced for the worldwide Pathé network repre-

9. *State Funeral of the Late Right Honourable Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup> 1919*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zw5bqS2bqKk>>.

10. Fonds Régie du cinéma, E188, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, Centre d'archives de Montréal.

11. "Canada's 'G.O.M.' [Grand Old Man]," *Pathé Gazette*, 1919, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SpwpMJYxHI>>.

8. *Ibid.*



sented in Canada by Ouimet's Specialty Film Import. It also testifies to the significant international circulation of at least some of the images collected across the country by Ouimet's employees. While the – to say the least – patchy preservation record of newsreels makes it difficult to document other instances of the use of images of the Laurier funeral in foreign newsreels, it seems quite likely that this British example was only the tip of the iceberg.

In Canada, Specialty struck no fewer than 22 prints of the Laurier funeral topical for national distribution – an almost unprecedented number in an era where leading Canadian film distributors generally believed that ten prints of a major release were sufficient to cover the country from coast to coast.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the U.S. trade journal *Exhibitors Herald and Motography* reported that this number had only been surpassed once before in Canada, for a Victory Loan picture.<sup>13</sup>

The production and distribution story of the film reveals how efficient Specialty Film Import had become by this point. Within 24 hours, the footage captured by Ouimet's three experienced camera operators had been shipped to Montreal where it was processed and edited, and multiple prints were readied for national distribution. By the afternoon of Sunday 23 February, at least five Montreal theatres were showing the topical, including the city's three largest movie palaces: the Loew's, the Théâtre Saint-Denis, and the Imperial.<sup>14</sup> In the predominantly French-speaking East End, the Théâtre national français, managed by Ouimet's former employer, Georges Gauvreau, programmed the topical of the funeral together with archi-

val moving pictures of Laurier giving speeches. Gauvreau also advertised a raffle for a 14"x18" portrait of Sir Wilfrid Laurier at each screening.<sup>15</sup>

Coincidentally, the Théâtre national français (now the live-music venue Le National) was located only a few meters away from the site of a previous encounter between the first French-Canadian prime minister of Canada and the first French-Canadian filmmaker, on 20 October 1908, while Laurier was campaigning in Montreal. Warned that the prime minister and his entourage were about to parade past the block where the National français and the Ouimetoscope both stood, Ouimet hurried to bring out his projector and hang a screen from the some of the wires overhanging Saint Catherine Street. When the cortège showed up, Ouimet screened an actuality he had shot a week before at an electoral rally in La Prairie. Laurier stopped to watch himself making a speech (allegedly a first for him), demanded a reprise of the reel, and then improvised a speech to the crowd that had assembled in front of the Ouimetoscope. The meeting reportedly ended with Ouimet handing Laurier a print of the actuality he had just screened (sadly now lost, like most of Ouimet's production). On the next day, *La Presse* reported that the crowd had cheered for Ouimet just as much as it had for Laurier.<sup>16</sup>

Ouimet's career hit many such high points between the mid-noughts and the early 1920s, but these alternated with several professional setbacks and personal tragedies. The vertical integration of the North American film industry threatened to make his film enterprise irrelevant, while the relentless battle against cinema launched by the all-powerful Catholic clergy caused him to waste much time, money, and energy on a series of legal fights. Furthermore, two of his three children died, in 1919 and 1921. These setbacks and tragedies eventually led to the unraveling of his organisation. In the early months of 1922, Ouimet decided to sell Specialty Film Import to Regal, a film distributor controlled by the American Paramount company.

12. Peter White, *Investigation into an Alleged Combine in the Motion Picture Industry in Canada, Report of Commissioner, April 30, 1931*. Ottawa: Canada Department of Labour, 1931, p.145.

13. Thirty-three prints of the Victory Loan picture had been struck. "Specialty Makes Record," *Exhibitors Herald and Motography*, 22 March 1919, p.47.

14. *The Funeral of Sir Wilfrid Laurier Ottawa Saturday Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup>*, Specialty Film Import advertisement, *Canadian Moving Picture Digest*, 1 March 1919; C.W. Lane, "Montreal and Quebec Notes," *Canadian Moving Picture Digest*, 1 March 1919, p.11; *La Patrie*, 22 February 1919, pp.20-21. The prints were only submitted to the Board of Censors of Moving Pictures of the Province of Quebec on the next day, as was sometimes the case with news films.

15. *La Patrie*, 22 February 1919, pp.20-21.

16. *La Presse*, 21 October 1908, p.5; Bélanger, *Les Ouimetoscopes, op.cit.*, pp.136-37.



Entering the Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica. *The Funeral of Sir Wilfrid Laurier*, Ottawa, Saturday Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup> (1919)

One of the few surviving traces of Léo-Ernest Ouimet's impressive film career, *The Funeral of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* required extensive restoration when it was acquired by Cinémathèque québécoise in 2016. Perforations were torn or even entirely missing on long stretches of film. Intertitles had all mysteriously been shortened to about eight frames. The nitrate film base, while still devoid of any trace of decomposition, had become brittle. It was therefore decided to send the film to L'Immagine Ritrovata in Bologna, where it was digitized in 4K and painstakingly restored under the supervision of Jean Gagnon, Director of Preservation and Access to Collections at the Cinémathèque québécoise. In addition to the digital restoration file, a 35mm print was made.

This impressive restoration transmuted what could have been yet another boring topical into a fascinating document. Ouimet's trusted cameramen were perfectly aware that crowds were an integral part of the displays they had been asked to record. Close study of the incredibly detailed images liberated by L'Immagine Ritrovata reveals countless portraits of men and women of all ages,

torn between their interest in the historical event unfolding before them, and their curiosity about the camera operators. Ouimet had long understood that the members of his audiences were just as curious about their own image as they were about the world at large. He thus made sure that the actualities and news films that he produced from 1906 onwards also functioned as local films, granting his fellow citizens a rare chance to see themselves on screen. This perceptive approach to actuality filmmaking ensures that *The Funeral of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* is still a mesmerizing document nearly a century later.

The author would like to thank all the individuals who graciously agreed to share their memories of Jean Bélanger: Carolle Bélanger, Robert Daudelin, Pierre Véronneau, Germain Lacasse, Don McWilliams, Serge Bromberg, Antoine Pelletier, François Auger, and Pierre Pageau.

Cet article relate comment une bande d'actualité de 1919 montrant les obsèques de M. Wilfrid Laurier, réalisée par le pionnier du cinéma canadien Léo-Ernest Ouimet, a été retrouvée, identifiée et restaurée par la Cinémathèque québécoise. Cette histoire est une saisissante démonstration de ce que les universitaires, archivistes et collectionneurs sont capables d'accomplir lorsqu'ils travaillent de concert.

L'article retrace la carrière de Ouimet de sa jeunesse comme garçon de ferme au statut de premier cinéaste franco-canadien et puissant distributeur de bandes d'actualités. Son succès fut conquis de haute lutte, notamment en raison de l'intégration verticale de l'industrie cinématographique nord-américaine et de la guerre contre le cinéma menée par le clergé catholique. Ces difficultés, venant s'ajouter à des tragédies personnelles, le conduisirent à céder son entreprise à un distributeur sous contrôle américain.

Bien que Ouimet ait produit près de 400 films, moins de 10% de sa production a survécu. Celui montrant les funérailles de Laurier, premier de ces films à être retrouvé depuis plus de 30 ans, a été acheté aux héritiers d'un collectionneur de longue date, et identifié pour partie grâce à des indices dans les documents en possession du collectionneur, et pour partie par un processus d'élimination, en le comparant à d'autres films du même événement. Sa restauration a été réalisée à L'Immagine Ritrovata de Bologne sous la supervision du directeur de conservation de la Cinémathèque québécoise, et le résultat montre non seulement le cortège funèbre, mais aussi des plans serrés des personnes présentes, des hommes et femmes de tous âges partagés entre leur intérêt pour l'événement historique se déroulant sous leurs yeux et leur curiosité pour le travail des cadres. *Les Obsèques de M. Wilfrid Laurier* reste un document fascinant près d'un siècle après l'événement qu'il donne à voir.

El artículo relata cómo una película de 1919 del funeral de Sir Wilfrid Laurier, realizada por el pionero canadiense Léo-Ernest Ouimet, fue redescubierta, identificada y restaurada por la Cinémathèque québécoise. Esta historia constituye una impactante demostración de lo que los académicos, archiveros y coleccionistas pueden lograr cuando trabajan juntos.

El artículo detalla la trayectoria de Ouimet desde joven granjero hasta convertirse en el primer cineasta franco-canadiense y el principal distribuidor de materiales de actualidad. Su éxito fue logrado con dificultad, sobre todo dada la integración vertical de la industria cinematográfica norteamericana y la guerra contra el cine llevada a cabo por el clero católico. Todo ello unido a tragedias personales le llevaron a vender su compañía a un distribuidor controlado por Estados Unidos.

Aunque Ouimet produjo alrededor de 400 películas, menos del diez por ciento de su producción se conserva actualmente. La pieza funeraria sobre Laurier, la primera que se ha encontrado en más de 30 años, fue comprada entre los bienes de un coleccionista e identificada en parte por las pistas que figuraban en los papeles de dicho coleccionista, y en parte a través del proceso de eliminación, comparándolo con otras películas del mismo evento. Fue restaurada en L'Immagine Ritrovata de Bolonia bajo la supervisión del Director de Preservación de la Cinémathèque québécoise, y el resultado final muestra no sólo el cortejo fúnebre, sino también innumerables retratos de los espectadores, hombres y mujeres de todas las edades divididos entre su interés por el acontecimiento histórico que se desarrolla ante ellos y su curiosidad por el trabajo de los operadores de cámaras. *The Funeral of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* sigue siendo un documento hipnótico casi un siglo después del acontecimiento.